REDUCING POVERTY FOR CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS

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First Focus
Children of immigrants are the fastest-growing group of American children.\(^1\) Approximately 18 million children in the United States live in a family with at least one immigrant parent,\(^2\) and an estimated 5 million children (of whom more than 80 percent are U.S. citizens) live in homes with at least one undocumented parent.\(^3\) According to projections by the Pew Research Center, by the year 2050, 1 in 3 children will be children of either first- or second-generation immigrants.\(^4\) Immigrant families, whether lawfully present or undocumented, face unique systemic barriers to attaining economic security. These recommendations highlight efforts to reduce these barriers among immigrant families and increase economic mobility for their children.

**KEEP FAMILIES TOGETHER**

Family separation due to deportation increases economic insecurity for immigrant families. Workplace raids often result in the loss of a primary breadwinner for a family, and the loss is compounded when this person is also the primary caregiver for minor children. According to a study of worksite raids by the Urban Institute, for every two adults apprehended, at least one child is impacted.\(^5\) Children who lose a parent due to sudden deportation or detention often end up in the child welfare system.\(^6\) Increased isolation and fear of separation create an environment of toxic stress that harms healthy child development and impedes educational achievement.\(^7\) The effects of toxic stress manifest in a number of ways in a child’s behavior, including problems sleeping, depression, anxiety, and an inability to focus in school due to fear of not seeing parents after school.\(^8\)

In addition to interior enforcement such as worksite raids, the Trump Administration is separating families at the border as a deterrence tactic to discourage families from seeking refuge in the United States.\(^9\) This practice has been condemned by both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association due to its unnecessary trauma and harmful effects on children.\(^10\) Separating families simply because of their immigration status is cruel and hypocritical at a time when states are begging for additional foster care supports due to an increase in children entering the foster care system.\(^11\) California legislation, the Reuniting Immigrant Families Act of 2013, addresses family separation issues and prioritizes keeping children with their families and out of the child welfare system.\(^12\)
Immigration policies should be modified to prioritize the unity of families. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security should allow discretion when detaining or deporting parents and caregivers of minor children. The Urban Institute recommends that Congress modify existing immigration law to allow for minor U.S.-citizen children to petition for lawful presence for their parents. Additionally, the institute recommends that detained parents be allowed to argue hardship on behalf of U.S.-citizen children before immigration judges. Finally, ending workplace raids will allow hardworking families to provide for the housing and nutritional needs of their children.

MAKE PUBLIC BENEFITS MORE INCLUSIVE, RATHER THAN MORE EXCLUSIVE

Access to housing and nutrition assistance programs are essential to income stability for low-income families regardless of immigration status. Families living from paycheck to paycheck can be devastated by a single trip to the emergency room. Often the working poor are forced to choose between buying groceries and paying other necessary bills. Assistance from public benefits reflects the basic needs of parents who work hard in low-wage positions that do not provide employer-sponsored health coverage or an adequate, living wage for their families.

Current eligibility for public assistance programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) applies only to qualified immigrants—green card holders and asylum seekers who have been in the country for more than five years. Undocumented immigrants and lawfully present immigrants who have not met the five-year requirement are not eligible.

Due to this restricted federal eligibility, and understanding the important role such programs have in economic stability for families, some states, including California and New York, have developed supplemental benefit programs that provide state funds to go beyond what immigrant families may be eligible for under federal guidelines. California’s CalFresh food assistance program provides nutrition assistance similar to that of SNAP to qualified immigrants, and New York’s Safety Net Assistance program provides temporary cash assistance for qualified immigrant families who are experiencing financial hardship but ineligible for TANF. With regard to healthcare,
31 states, including Florida and Utah, have chosen to waive the five-year waiting period for Medicaid and/or Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) coverage for lawfully present immigrant children. California now covers all income-eligible children under 18 in its state Medicaid program, Medi-Cal.

In contrast, a recently leaked draft proposal from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security proposes to punish immigrant families by expanding the term public charge (i.e., burden on the public coffers) in the consideration of an application for citizenship and/or lawful admission. The proposed rule would allow government officials to consider an applicant’s family members’ (including U.S.-citizen children’s) use of direct cash benefits as well as a broader range of services, such as CHIP, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and SNAP. Limiting access to health and nutrition programs for families in poverty will potentially result in increased food insecurity, housing instability, toxic stress, and other consequences that all negatively affect healthy child development and academic achievement. Any of the proposed changes to benefit eligibility rules would no doubt cause a decline in the use of services, regardless of actual eligibility changes. Families would be forced to choose family unity over health and well-being.

Policies and programs designed to safeguard vulnerable, low-income children should continuously aim to be more inclusive, rather than more exclusive. Any proposed policies and practices must ensure that regardless of where a child was born, he or she gets equal access to healthcare, education, proper nutrition, and the support needed to have a fair chance to succeed.

INCREASE ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Evaluations of early childhood education programs show that early education provides educational and socioeconomic mobility for low-income minority children. Although all children, regardless of immigration status, are guaranteed a K–12 education in the United States, English language learners (children whose first language is not English) face significant barriers in achieving educational success. Early education provides significant benefits for these students, including building social and literacy skills that will allow them to reduce the educational gap that often starts in kindergarten. Additionally, studies show that access to early childhood
programs increases the likelihood of stronger contributions to the economy as an adult.26 Enrollment efforts must target immigrant populations to ensure that all children have access to early childhood programs in their community. Some ways to do so include creating language-appropriate materials for each community, making connections with local agencies that serve immigrant populations, and educating families on eligibility for and the benefits of the programs offered.27

Similarly, the cost of secondary education has significantly increased over the years, and most U.S.-citizen students rely on federal or state financial assistance to help their families manage these costs. Children of immigrants face barriers to receiving financial assistance to attend higher education institutions. Undocumented students are not eligible for public federal or state grants, and some states (Alabama and South Carolina, as of 2013) completely prohibit undocumented students from enrolling in any higher education institution.28 Although Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which made it possible for undocumented young people to attend college,29 was highly successful in creating pathways for children of immigrants to gain social and economic opportunities, the Trump Administration ended the program in 2017. Without congressional action, more than 800,000 young people will soon lose their work authorization and access to college.30

Congress must find a legislative solution for DACA recipients to continue their education and work in their communities. Although some states allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition, only four states allow these students to access publicly funded grants.31 State legislatures should pass legislation to allow such students access to grants and higher education cost assistance. Increasing the number of potential entrepreneurs and skilled workers in our communities will have a direct economic impact, locally and nationally.

CONCLUSION

Recent studies have shown that the average number of U.S. childbirths has drastically declined since the 1950s while the number of elderly continues to increase.32 Therefore, the future cost per worker to support the very young and the elderly is expected to increase.33 Similarly, a recent report by PolicyLink34 highlights the dramatic increase in the gap between the number of seniors of color and the number of young people of color. The report suggests an urgency in policy response to ensure
that all low-income children of color and English language learners can access the education and supports needed to succeed in the future.

Everyone—regardless of socioeconomic status—benefits from strategies that lift children out of poverty. The Annie E. Casey Foundation cautions that “our future prosperity is in peril if we enact policies that derail these young lives because of their race, ethnicity or country of birth, or a parent’s country of birth.” If children of immigrants, who now comprise a quarter of the U.S. child population, are denied the supports they need to grow and thrive, we all lose.
ENDNOTES


8. Ibid.


10. Ibid.


12. Kelly et al., The Foster Care Housing Crisis.


18. Ibid.

20. Ibid.


25. Leseman, Early Education for Immigrant Children.


27. Ibid.


30. Ibid.


33. Ibid.


35. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017 Race for Results, 5.

36. Ibid.